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Lucia A Keegan 07/18/2006 03:09:58 PM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 004850

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/17/2017  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [AEMR](#) [MARR](#) [CASC](#) [LE](#) [KHLs](#) [FR](#)  
SUBJECT: FRENCH REACTIONS TO ESCALATING SITUATION IN THE  
MIDDLE EAST

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, Reason 1  
.4 B/D

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Chirac, speaking from St. Petersburg on Sunday, supported a G8 call for an end to Hezbollah and Israeli military actions and the immediate disarmament of Hezbollah. Chirac and French public officials at all levels continue to call Israel's reactions disproportionate, but provoked. Following emergency cabinet level meetings this morning, Prime Minister de Villepin and FM Douste-Blazy departed for Beirut where they will meet their counterparts and address Lebanon's French community. France's military has been mobilized in anticipation of evacuating as many as 6000 EU nationals, and as needed, nationals of the US and other countries. According to MFA officials, FM Douste-Blazy spoke late last night with Foreign Ministers of Germany and Spain about evacuation efforts and to advise them of today's mission to Lebanon. He also spoke with Israeli Foreign Minister Livni and Lebanese Prime Minister Siniora, to whom he pledged France's solidarity and sympathy for civilian casualties. The situation is dominating most headlines and personalities from across the spectrum of French society are calling for an end to the violence, while speculating on the possible spread of the conflict. The US role in the Middle East figures heavily in their analyses. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) President Chirac, speaking from St. Petersburg on Sunday after a bilateral meeting with President Bush,

supported a G8 call for an end to Hezbollah and Israeli offensive actions and the immediate disarmament of Shia Lebanese Hezbollah. He reiterated that international pressure for further implementation of UNSCR 1559 and full empowerment of the democratically-elected Lebanese government remain critical elements of any long term solution to the current crisis. Noting his accord with President Bush, he gave full French support to the UN Mission's role in mediating the release of Israeli soldiers and the cessation of attacks into Israel. According to press reports, Chirac also commented that the G8 recognized the "disproportionate character" of Israel's reactions, while at the same time acknowledging that Israel had been provoked. Chirac warned that the current crisis threatened the stability of the entire region.

¶3. (C) Prime de Villepin and FM Douste-Blazy departed for Lebanon this afternoon after a meeting with Defense Minister Alliot-Marie. According to MFA officials, they intend to see their counterparts, express solidarity with the Lebanese people, and convey condolences for civilian deaths. Prime Minister de Villepin will likely address the French community and meet with French evacuees as they depart Lebanon via a Greek ferry ship bound for Cyprus.

¶4. (C) On July 17, FM Douste-Blazy's cabinet advisor for Middle East Affairs, Christophe Guilhou, told poloff that the FM had contacted Israeli FM Livni late on the night of July 16, as well as Lebanese Prime Minister Siniora, to discuss the situation and advise them of today's mission. He was also in contact with his German and Spanish counterparts about evacuation efforts and analysis of the crisis. Mr. Guilhou reiterated points made by Chirac at the G8 concerning immediate implementation of UNSCR 1559 and the protection of civilian populations. He was unsure what steps France would seek in the Security Council at the moment but mentioned the possibility for further UNSC action. Expressing a certain frustration at Israeli military actions, he said the destruction to civilian infrastructure was making French evacuation operations difficult.

¶5. (C) France is moving quickly to evacuate all French nationals seeking assistance. Overnight, we understand that the French have reinforced their Embassy personnel and sent a passenger ferry to Lebanon that should hold as many as 1,200 people. They have activated helicopters, transport aircraft, and a Dock Landing Ship with capability of hosting up to 1,800 people. There are 17,000 French nationals reportedly living in Lebanon, and an additional 14,000 EU nationals who may be in need of evacuation. The French Joint Operations staff is estimating 6,000 people will seek assistance. The first ferry from Lebanon should arrive in Cyprus the evening of July 17.

¶6. (U) The key messages delivered by most officials and commentators on the situation were mixed, but focused on: disproportionate use of force by the Israelis, threat of the spread of violence into neighboring states, speculation of Iran's influence on Hezbollah's actions, and regret at the destruction of years of rebuilding in Lebanon after the brutal civil war. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy called Hezbollah the "aggressor" and supported Israel's right to defend itself. He went further than other French officials by publicly commenting on links between Hezbollah and Iran. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs under President Mitterrand, Roland Dumas, warned of further escalation and (predictably) blamed Israeli and US policies for the current crisis. He pressed for France to take a lead role in seeking an initiative with other "non Anglo-Saxon" countries like Italy, Spain, and Greece. Former FM (and Sarkozy advisor) Herve de Charette called Hezbollah's actions deliberate and clearly a concerted effort with other actors in the region, notably Syria and Iran. Israel's overreaction to Hezbollah's provocation, however, had only served to make Israel appear as the aggressor. He called for the EU to take a more active role in the crisis, and avoid letting the US dictate EU policy in the region. UMP Parliamentarian, Pierre Lellouche also warned of the implications for further escalation.

Israeli actions, he said, were only serving to further radicalize Hamas. Iran, he said, was likely responsible for the events as a way to turn attention away from the Iranian nuclear question at the G8.

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